

# Late Returns

'Often, for undaunted courage, fate spares the man it has not already marked.'

1300 years ago an unknown English author penned the epic poem, Beowulf. Written in Old English, the events described take place in Scandinavia. The story includes the Swede hero, Beowulf and a coterie of villains that stand in the way of decency.

There are Danish kings. First, Shild, who dies heroically in the prologue, and Hrothgar who manages to lose 30 of his warriors to the antagonist, Grendel. Beowulf, after much mead and braggadocio to the Danish king, hunts down and kills Grendel, ripping his arm off in the melee.

Grendel's mother is distressed by Grendel's demise. She remains an unnamed but fierce woman. She drags Beowulf to the bottom of the lake. There, after a nasty dust-up, Beowulf kills Grendel's mom and chops off the already dead head of Grendel as evidence of his victory.

After extracting his reward from the obsequious Danes, Beowulf and his army hightail it back to Sweden.

From this point on, there's an unexplained gap in the story line, but many years later Beowulf has become King of "Det avlånga landet," the elongated country.

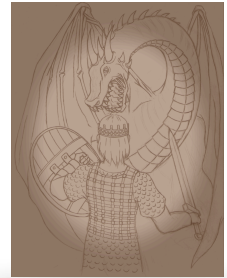


At some point, a dragon ends up burning Beowulf's redoubt to the ground. Beowulf goes on a tear, slays the dragon and is fatally wounded in the struggle.

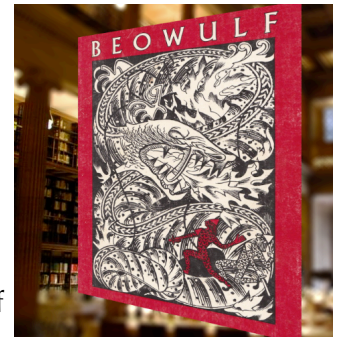
Using negative reinforcement in a ham-fisted attempt to rally the troops, Beowulf's heir excoriates the troops. They've betrayed the standard of bravery and courage Beowulf championed. Downcast, they scurried away.



In the last act, Beowulf is consumed in a funeral pyre. The tale begins and ends with the death of a great warrior.



In 1928, a young boy by the name of Jack Hartman, a curious moppet just 12 years old, was haunting the halls of the St. Paul public library. He'd heard tantalizing tales surrounding the Beowulf legend. Being a curious youngster, he checked out the worn tome, excited to absorb the Beowulf lore. Jack Hartman was a curious stripling. The ideas contained in the bygone tale captivated him.



The clerk stamped a return date of 14-days on the library card. The librarian had witnessed similar excitement amongst many young readers. She reminded him in a flinty tone.

*"You can only keep the book 14 days. After that the fine is two-cents a day for late returns."*

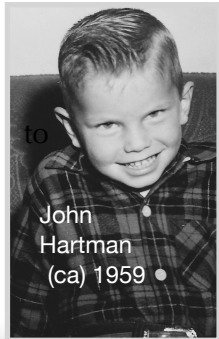
In 1928, two-cents was a formidable sum young Jack Hartman could never afford.



Little is known as to what Jack Hartman thought of the brave warrior, Beowulf.

We do know that several years later, young Jack parachuted from his burning B-24 only to be taken prisoner by the Nazis. In many respects, Jack Hartman's story paralleled Beowulf's.

We pick-up this story 15-years after the war's end, well after Jack Hartman's liberation from Hitler's dragoons. 1959 was when I learned Jack Hartman had never returned the book. It was well more than 14-days over due. I panicked. The library would certainly be hunting for it. At 10-years of age, I feared the appearance of jack-booted book police.



Filled with dread, I dithered, spending hours considering what course to pursue. I masked my despair, hiding behind dozens of Skippy peanut butter and jelly sandwiches slathered on Wonder bread.

I avoided eye contact with both of my parents. The ease with which they moved under what must have been unbearable stress seemed counterfactual to me. My parents, the very people who'd shipped me off to Catholic school to learn moral clarity, were prancing about while harboring stolen property in the attic. The incongruity was troubling.

I considered dragging my older sister and brother into the outrage. Perhaps they possessed deeper insights into my parents. Maybe they were aware of my progenitor's misdeeds. But then, I considered the possibility that my siblings might be in on the whole thing, acting in concert to aide and abet familial criminality.



Confused, I retreated to the attic to think. My parents, consorting to conceal their perfidy and my siblings - likely in on the scheme. My options were disappearing.

Having watched hours of Perry Mason and Dragnet on the family's Muntz TV, I knew I could never confront them without solid, damning evidence. I pulled the library card from the flimsy pocket at the back of the book.

The card was stamped June 17, 1928. I was never any good at math, but I knew only truth would clear this mess up. I'd have to present science-based evidence before my family would admit to their malfeasance.

Applying what stealth I could muster, I crept downstairs to the living room. My old man, an inveterate crossword puzzler, always kept a pencil and paper next to his Lay-Z-Boy. I snatched up the tools and skedaddled back up to the attic.

Using my fingers and toes, I counted the number of years between 1928 and 1959. I was agitated. It took me several recounts before I came to the correct figure.

The book was 31 years overdue. Multiplying by 365, and then again by .02 cents I came up with the astonishing overdue fine of \$226.30. If I spoke up, we were all headed to pauper's prison. Crime doesn't pay ... that's what Jack Hartman always reminded me. Yet here I was, 10-years old - about to see my entire family jailed. After a couple PB&J sandwiches, I decided discretion was better in the long run. I tucked Beowulf back into hiding and zipped my lip. "Leave it for the next guy," I thought.

